

Does Haj Make a Difference

The Jakarta Post, November 26, 2009

Oleh: Abdul Kadir Riyadi

Millions of Muslims across the globe are now gathering in Mecca to perform the fifth pillar of Islam, haj.

The haj is obligatory for Muslims once in their life when they can afford to pay their expenses and secure provisions for their families until their return.

Given the nature of the haj, this annual rite is wealth-related. Indonesia alone sends about 210,000 pilgrims to Saudi Arabia, spending thousands of dollars before, during and after the pilgrimage.

Apart from the haj cost, they also must host often-large-crowds of friends and relatives in a feast normally consisting of drinks, popcorn, candies and other treats.

To book the trip, some pilgrims save for years or else sell their assets and belongings, such as productive land and property, sacrificing their very source of living. But does all this spending bring these pilgrims closer to God and make them better people?

One is right in assuming that the haj can indeed be good for Muslims in their spiritual life by bringing a greater sense of inner peace and tranquility.

But it is also legitimate – given the rampant corruption in our society – to expect that the haj does bring a positive influence upon those who perform it, then in one way or another they can have a positive influence upon their society.

In our country where corruption is rampant, one would ask where are the haj pilgrims in this state of social, spiritual and religious corruption?

I remember as a child that a person who returned from the holy land behaved rather differently and was able to influence others to behave properly. They became more virtuous and committed to their religion and social services. They became more charitable and kind. They abandoned most of their small vices and addictions, such as smoking and meaningless socializing. The haj pilgrims would also be more committed to the mosque and were prepared to listen for hours to lessons by religious scholars.

In those days, the ones who earned the title haji would mostly display the qualities of a pious person.

The haji rarely took up old habits or frivolous pursuits. The haj leaves a firm impression that often lasts forever.

Nowadays, there is doubt whether the haj constitutes a turning point in a person's life or has a positive influence on their attitude to life.

The current moral state of our society does not reflect the spirit of the haj as a means toward self-transformation.

While Islam teaches through the haj that we are more than mere physical creatures and should strive continuously to reach our spiritual goal beyond matter, many haji do the reverse by striving for material advantages, often illegally.

Corruption in this country is often committed by the haji, a fact that raises skepticism about the quality and the transformative power of the haj.

All this has nothing to do with the haj itself. The haj remains the pivotal means for spiritual purification and religious enlightenment. The holy prophet says, "A person who performs the haj properly will return as a new-born baby [free of sin]".

But the fact that the haj has often been manipulated, mainly by the capital-owners, makes the holy pilgrimage often lose its true meaning.

For wealthy people, the haj has become like a trip to Singapore or Thailand. For the capital-owners, such as those who own the so-called KBIH (a group that organizes haj training prior to the departure to the holy land) it is a lucrative business. The brisk business that takes place during the haj season is enough to realize that commerce is the determinant factor of the haj.

The fact that millions of Muslims in Indonesia who have performed the haj have failed to transform the country into a better society, morally attests to the haj's dim impact.

If the haj does not bring about meaningful change in our society, and becomes a mere physical exercise devoid of any spiritual significance, performing the haj will parallel idol-worship activity.

The writer graduated from Al-Azhar University Cairo and the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He currently teaches at the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) in Surabaya.